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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 000589

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA, NEA/MAG AND IO/UNP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/09/2019

TAGS: PREL PBTS WI AG UNSC NO MO

SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA UN ENVOY ROSS IN RABAT: PUBLIC
PROGRESS, PRIVATE PROBLEMS

REF: A. ALGIERS 0642 (NOTAL)
¶B. RABAT 0541 (NOTAL)

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1
.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: UNSYG Personal Envoy for Western Sahara Christopher Ross left Morocco after his second visit June 30, without final agreement on proposed informal talks. Despite positive statements in public, neither place nor date has been agreed for the informals, designed to re-launch UN-sponsored negotiations, stalled for almost a year and a half. Apparently, after learning that the UNSYG's Envoy had brought no reply from Bouteftika on better bilateral relations, King Mohammed VI declined at the last minute to see Ambassador Ross. MFA contacts also told us that despite Algerian assent to attend the informals (as sought Ref B), the GOM now wanted assurances the GOA would "fully" participate, and asked Ross for a roadmap of how the informals would lead to negotiations. The Polisario announcement that it would go to a Vienna meeting made it difficult for the GOM to agree, but Ross has other prospective venues. While in Rabat, Ross also saw Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) Secretary General Habib Ben Yahya to talk regional integration and met rising politician and royal friend Fouad Ali El Himma. The Moroccans agreed with Ross to follow up in New York. They have asked for engagement by the USG and the other Friends with Algeria. A diplomatic push for flexibility by both countries might help get the process back on track. End Summary.

Positive Spin on a Diplomatic Curveball

¶2. (U) Foreign Minister Taieb Fassi Fihri was joined by external intelligence service chief and de facto national security advisor Mohamed Yassine Mansouri and MFA Director General for Multilateral Relations Ambassador Affairs Nasser Bourita for extended meetings July 29 with Personal Envoy of the Secretary General (PESYG) Ambassador Christopher Ross, who was accompanied by staffers from DPA and DPKO. They were joined at dinner by CORCAS head Kalihenna Ould er Rachid, who also met with them separately. Ould er Rachid was boosted by his party's recent victory in local council elections in Laayoune, the capital of Western Sahara. Ross and delegation also met with Minister of Interior Chakib Benmoussa. In remarks to the press, Fassi Fihri declared Morocco was willing to participate in the informals.

¶3. (C) According to a July 1 readout from local UN ResRep

Mourad Wahba, the meeting produced Moroccan agreement to attend the informal meetings proposed by Ross, but with a condition: that Algeria openly participate, albeit informally. (Note: Ref A reported that Algeria had accepted to join the informal talks, which the Moroccans had sought per Ref B. End Note.) Algeria had not agreed to the profile that the GOM has demanded as a condition. Neither date nor site was fixed but Ross has a good offer from Norway to host the talks, which still could take place in early August.

¶4. (S) Ross was kept on tenterhooks until the very last minute about whether he would have a meeting with King Mohammed VI. The meeting ultimately did not happen. It is likely that in his preparatory meetings with the Foreign Minister, Ross was not able to report that he had a direct answer from President Bouteflika, despite two intervening visits to Algiers, to the proposals on bilateral ties Ross had carried in February from the King to the Algerian President.

What a Moroccan Wants

¶5. (C) MFA Director General for Multilateral Affairs Nasser Bourita, a GOM expert on the Western Sahara issue, subsequently told PolCouns that the King had already accepted the informal round in principle during the envoy's visit in February. However, Morocco still had questions that it needed Ross to clarify; Algerian agreement to attend as observers only was not sufficient. In informals normally all would participate in the discussions. Algeria needed to participate fully, if informally.

¶6. (C) Bourita said Morocco also wanted from Ross a vision,
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in effect a roadmap of where the informal will lead, before agreeing. Would there be multiple informals? Was there a target date for negotiations? Would the informals produce an agenda? He feared the informals could turn into a whole new process/format. Finally, he said the GOM remained unhappy with the Vienna location, since it was announced by the Polisario. Why should the GOM accept a Polisario fait accompli? The Polisario's announcement showed that the Front would not respect the confidentiality that Ross wanted for the informal talks.

Next Steps

¶7. (C) Ambassador Bourita said Ross would continue to work details with the parties and the Friends in New York on the many open questions; these include the level of the informal meetings, which could be below the ministerial level of Manhasset. On July 9, Bourita re-convoked PolCouns to underscore Moroccan interest in substantive Algerian participation in the informals, to include on bilateral issues. He requested that the USG and other Friends engage with Algeria to urge flexibility. PolCouns recalled traditional Algerian reticence, and hoped that Morocco could avoid putting at risk the informals, and a re-start of the long stalled negotiating process.

Ross's Side Meetings in Rabat

¶8. (SBU) At the embassy's suggestion, Ross took the initiative to meet Arab Maghreb Union Secretary General Habib Ben Yahya, who briefed him on AMU efforts to promote low-level economic functional regional integration. In his remarks to the press, Ross spoke of his efforts to promote integration, referring to the part of his mandate to enhance Moroccan-Algerian relations.

¶9. (C) On June 28, Ross, his team and PolCouns met informally with Fouad Ali El Himma, the closest friend of King Mohammed VI and the driving force behind the new Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM). The PAM, although created only a year ago, won the most seats in recent local council elections. PAM Party Secretary General Mohammed Sheikh Biadillah, a Sahrawi and former Minister of Health, joined the meeting at El Himma's residence. In addition to domestic politics, they detailed their failed efforts to defeat the political machine of Kalihenna Ould er Rachid, current Chairman of the Royal Sahara Council (CORCAS), in the municipal elections in Laayoune, capital of Western Sahara. While winning not a seat in the capital, the PAM was able to unite the opposition, and Biadillah himself, a former Polisario leader, was elected deputy chairman of the council of Samara, another town near the berm. He and El Himma indicated that PAM would continue to work against the Kalihenna clan. (Note: Ross had in February conveyed to the GOM Polisario objections to Kalihenna being a member of the GOM delegation. End Note.) That evening, at the embassy's July 4 reception, Ross met some Sahrawis from this side of the berm, helping him gain perspective on the views of residents of the Western Sahara territory, which he has so far not visited.

Comment

¶10. (C) The visit led to the first public acceptance by the GOM of the proposed informal meeting, although it had earlier agreed in principle. It is unclear whether GOM conditions and objections over details reflect issues of principle or pique; it may have moved the goalposts on its conditions for the talks. The Moroccans surely remain concerned that their efforts to improve the environment with Algeria continue to get nowhere, despite Ross, efforts on his wider mandate. It is far from certain that these questions can be resolved in time to permit the convening of the informals before mid-August. Any later runs the risk of being disrupted by Ramadan, which would carry them into the September UNGA timeframe. It is not certain that even with delegations limited to two, that Morocco would not use one seat for Kalihenna or another pro-Morocco Sahrawi. For now, the discussion shifts to the corridors of the UN. Encouragement by the Friends of flexibility from both the Algerians and the

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Moroccans could help get this still-elementary stage in the rebirth of Western Sahara negotiations and inter-Mahgreb dialogue back on track. End Comment.

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Jackson